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MICHAŁ BZINKOWSKI
JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY, KRAKÓW

AKRITAS – NIKOS KAZANTZAKIS' LITTLE-KNOWN UNREALIZED EPIC PROJECT

Πιστεύω στην καρδιά του ανθρώπου, το χωματένιο αλώνι,
όπου μέρα και νύχτα παλεύει ο Ακρίτας με το θάνατο

I believe in Man's heart, that earthen threshing-floor
where night and day the defender of the borders fight with death

Ασκητική. Salvatores Dei[1]

ABSTRACT: Kazantzakis' *Odyssey* – apart from the abundance of philosophical as well as ideological influences of many different sources which the writer tried to unify into a universal cosmotheory – constitutes a large-scale attempt by a Modern Greek writer to respond to Homeric epic. Yet, the author of *Zorba the Greek* sketched another epic composition that, according to his vision, aimed at reaching further than his *magnum opus*. His ambition was to encompass the long-lasting period between Ancient and Modern Greece, namely that of the Byzantine empire and its radiating influence on Greek consciousness and identity. He entitled his project *Akritas*, thus directly alluding to the only epic poem in Byzantine Greek literature, *Digenes Akritas*, and its protagonist as well as to *acritic* songs from Cyprus, where the latter's name appears. In the present paper I would like to shed some light on Kazantzakis' approach to Byzantium and its significance in defining the Greek identity through this unfinished sketch that the writer in fact never began.

1 Translated by K. Friar (Kazantzakis 1960).

KEY WORDS: Modern Greek literature, Modern Greek poetry, reception of Antiquity, Nikos Kazantzakis, Akritas, Byzantium

One of the most profound and internationally renowned Modern Greek writers, Nikos Kazantzakis, always stressed his close affinity to Homer, whom he regarded as his major influence, along with other significant personages like Buddha, Nietzsche and Bergson.[2] Kazantzakis' concepts continuously evolved and soon after the publication of his enormous work based on the Homeric myth, the *Odyssey* (Οδύσσεια, 1st edition 1938),[3] which took fourteen years to write (1925–1938),[4] he planned another large-scale epic work that was not only to equal his modern sequel of the Homeric epic, but even to reach further.[5] By entitling his work *Akritas* (Ακρίτας), he obviously alluded to the protagonist of the Byzantine epic written in early demotic Greek, Digenes Akritas, one of the most significant and symbolic personages in Greek culture.[6] This seems to be extremely relevant to the diachronic aspect of Greek culture, because, as it has been now and then postulated, the character of Modern Greek literature could be best described using the epic hero's name, as

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2 As Kazantzakis writes in his foreword to *Report to Greco* (Αναφορά στον Γκρέκο): «The decisive steps in my ascent were four, and each bears a sacred name: Christ, Buddha, Lenin, Odysseus. This bloody journey from each of these great souls to the next is what I shall struggle to mark out in this Itinerary' [translated by P. Bien] (Τέσσερα στάθηκαν τ'αποφασιστικά σκαλοπάτια στο ανηφόρισμά μου, και το καθένα φέρνει ένα γερό όνομα: Χριστός, Βούδας, Λένιν, Οδυσσέας. Αυτή την αιματερή πορεία μου, από τη μία από τις μεγάλες αυτές ψυχές στην άλλη [...] μάχουμαι στο Οδοιπορικό μου ετούτο να σημαδέψω (Kazantzakis, Αναφορά: 16)). See also Beaton 2004: 118.

3 It is better known in an English translation by K. Friar (Kazantzakis 1969).

4 Beaton 2004: 121.

5 Later, according to the *Four hundred letters* (Τετρακόσια Γράμματα του Καζαντζάκη στον Πρεβελάκη), he wrote to Prevelakis, Kazantzakis projected another ambitious allegorical epic, this time entitled «Faust, Part III'. Bien 2015: 226–227. It is worth underlining that, although the *Akritas* project was not only never completed but not even begun, some of the ideas the writer was obsessed with were later incorporated into his tragedy that he rewrote in 1944, especially in *Prometheus Unbound* (Προμηθέας Λυόμενος), and generally some hints to *Akritas* we come across in the whole *Prometheus* trilogy. See Bien 2007: 187ff. Moreover, *Akritas'* sketchbook of 1942 contains some seeds for the tragedy *Kapodistrias* (Καποδίστριας, 1st edition 1946). See Bien 2007: 224.

6 Bien 2007: 180ff; Wrazas 2009: 171ff.

'acritic', namely encompassing within itself the characteristics both of learned and demotic tradition as well as Oriental and European features.[7]

In his 1940 sketch for the work that was never to be completed, he determined the main axis differentiating his new epic from the *Odyssey*. While his Odysseus was 'the last old man', Akritas was to be 'the first new man', and the entire work was supposed to be subtitled 'New Adam'. As we can guess from his tentative sketch of 1942, he intended his new work, at least seemingly, as a kind of synthesis of Hellenism, in which symbolic Oriental-European nature is expressed precisely in the name of the protagonist of the Byzantine epic, the offspring of a Christian Greek mother and a Muslim Syrian emir father (*di-genes*, which means 'of double descent').[8]

Kazantzakis' interest in Byzantine themes, especially as regards religion in its mystical dimension as well as the history of the Byzantine Empire, particularly its 'tragic' emperors, could be traced back to his early childhood, as attested in *Report to Greco*[9]. Apart from *Askitiki*, where he mingled existential philosophy with Christian mysticism, Kazantzakis explores Byzantine history in his well-known three tragedies, *Julian the Apostate* (Ιουλιανός ο Παραβάτης, 1945), *Nikiforos Fokas* (Νικηφόρος Φωκάς, 1927) and *Constantine Palaiologos* (Κωνσταντίνος ο Παλαιολόγος, 1951). However, as it has already been noted by Roilos, in those works the writer rather strives to create his own mythology glorifying the Byzantine past.[10] Byzantium became for Kazantzakis a significant source both of spirituality that tied in with his unique cosmotheory and of patterns of heroism well illustrated by the conduct of the protagonists of his tragedies.[11]

Characteristically, Kazantzakis didn't choose the name of the Byzantine hero which is widespread throughout Greece, Digenes (Διγενής) but he took the less common Pontic variant, Akritas (Ακρίτας), known only there and present in folk songs, which is, by the way, the name

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7 Kohler 1998: 27–28.

8 Bien 2007: 180–182.

9 Roilos 2001: 229.

10 Roilos 2001: 230ff. As Roilos notes, *Constantine Palaiologos* is the only 'Byzantine' tragedy of Kazantzakis containing some traces of the nationalistic feelings known to its audience. Roilos 2001: 236.

11 Roilos 2001: 237.

slightly changed in modern age by Sathas and Legrand who discovered the first manuscript of the epic and decided it would suit better than *Akritis* (Ακρίτης).[12] The name must have been of great importance for Kazantzakis since he had used it as one of his pseudonyms in the articles he published in *Akropolis* in 1906.[13]

Virtually the only source one might use when tracing Kazantzakis' project is his private notebooks and letters, especially those to his close friend, the well-known Cretan writer, Pandelis Prevelakis,[14] a correspondence which lasted thirty one years, until Kazantzakis' death. In them we could grasp some ideas and hints regarding his unrealized epic project, to which, as Kazantzakis' wife Helen declared, the writer vowed that he would 'devote the rest of his existence.'[15]

The idea of a large-scale composition must have accompanied the writer since his early years. In a letter to Prevelakis from Siberia in 1929, Kazantzakis expresses the idea that the superiority of his *Odyssey* lies only in the fact that it is a continuation of Homer, but referring to Prevelakis' own *Akritas* project, he writes that such an endeavour would comprise 'the whole of Christian and medieval life,' through the use of Dante's allegorical method.[16] Moreover, Kazantzakis wishes he could finish the whole epic before he dies (Siberia, 22 February 1929).

Ten years later, he writes to Prevelakis that he had already taken a final decision to write *Akritas* in 33,333 seventeen syllable verses (exactly in the same manner as his *Odyssey*) (17 March 1939, letter 262). When the Cretan writer resided in London, invited by the British Council several months later, he added that as a 'mate of the *Odyssey*' *Akritas* 'will be the final significant work of his life' and that his sojourn in London might help in his work that is 'swelling in his brain' (July 1939).

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12 Beaton 1980: 78.

13 Roilos 2001: 230. Roilos adds that it might have been caused by the rediscovery of the text of Digenis Akritas by Greek intellectuals of that time, especially the founder of folk studies in Greece, Nikolaos Politis (1852–1921).

14 Kazantzakis 1984 (2nd edition). English translation of some letters was made by P. Bien (Kazantzakis 2011). In the present paper, in some cases, the translations of Kazantzakis' letters are by the author, which is always highlighted by the mention of the number of a cited letter.

15 Kazantzakis 1968: 382.

16 Bien 2007: 112.

Surprisingly, if we read carefully the letters from his time in England, we could have an impression that Kazantzakis feels a little overwhelmed and clearly needs some solitude to move forward with his literary work. As he confesses somewhat strikingly, his *Odyssey* was only one 'flood in [his] breast', and he fears whether he had said anything significant at all or is afraid whether he manages to express, before he dies, all the richness and beauty of the world that he was overflowing with. *Akritas*, if we are to believe his letter from the following year, was entirely in his mind; however, he had not started it by that time. He was fully aware then that it was going to be his 'swan song' (κύκνειο άσμα, 1 September 1940, letter 270).

Kazantzakis' intention was, firstly, to distance himself from his previous *magnum opus* that ended in the summit of Nada and to rise to a higher level (ν΄ανέβω στο πιο αψηλό πάτωμα), which means to transcend everything and achieve such a high metaphysical level that could be called 'reality beyond reality.'[17] In order to fully realize the scale of Kazantzakis' endeavour it is worth quoting the relevant fragment of the above-mentioned letter:

> *I intend here to ascent to the highest level, beyond fleshly reality, to where animals, trees, water wells, and fairy tale talks like people, and where people walk along the street or make war in the wilderness as though in a fairy tale. I will obliterate time and space; I will play, liberated from the obligations imposed by reason; I will dance without feet.* (23 July 1939, letter 262)

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[17] Bien 2015: 227. Bien notes that such a remarkable achievement that Shakespeare and other great writers managed to attain, was rather unobtainable for Kazantzakis and, according to him, the Cretan writer fortunately 'did not pursue this chimera.' Bien 2015: 227. Bien also pays attention to the fact that Kazantzakis wanted to abandon the real world in the way Shakespeare did it in his drama *The Tempest* (Bien 2007: 112 and 182). Kazantzakis himself admits that he probably feels – just as Shakespeare must have felt writing *The Tempest* – 'a bittersweet shiver and [...] a playful, exceedingly sorrowful farewell of this sort' (γλυκό, πικρό ανατρίχιασμα [...] ένα τέτοιο παιχνιδιάρικο, πικρότατο αποχαιρετισμό, letter 262). See also Bien 2007: 181. It is noteworthy that Kazantzakis' concept was based on Hyppolyte Taine's views regarding the interpretation of *The Tempest*, which were copied by the Cretan writer into his notebook featuring a sketch for *Akritas*. See Bien 2007: 112 and 129.

As seen in the above-mentioned passage, Kazantzakis' intention was to create something in the mode of a modern *Divine Comedy*, where 'time will be abolished' and places will be mingled up.[18] In his notes he explains that – just as Odysseus from his *Odyssey* was 'Hell and Purgatory' – *Akritas* was intended to be the 'Paradise of the Odyssey' (Παράδεισος της Οδύσσειας) and the protagonist himself was devised as «The New Adam» (in contrast to his Odysseus characterized as 'the last old man'[19]).

As regards further notes concerning the planned epic in Kazantzakis' sketchbook, the main character was meant to achieve a sort of mystical union with the universal stream of life, something that was unattainable by the protagonist of the *Odyssey*, who was only able to reach the level of realizing that 'the good and the evil are the same.'[20] It was Akritas who was capable of attaining the highest level of initiation, one which would even allow him, according to Kazantzakis' notes, to resurrect Christ, so that he could save the damned, even the an achievement possible only if he were resurrected in Akritas' heart (letter 262).

There are other 'shadows' that are intended to be resurrected by Akritas: Oedipus, Zeus, Prometheus, Macbeth and Judas. The other mythical, legendary and fairy-tale characters, such as Little Red Riding Hood, Alice, Pinocchio, Snow White, gather around Akritas, who 'thickens the nothingness, the Nada, and makes it visible, rarifies it and vanishes' (πυκνώνει το τίποτα, το Νάδα, και το κάνει ορατό, το αραιώνει κι αφανίζεται, letter 262). Lastly 'the male peacock opens his wings in a playful and windy way' (παιχνιδοφυσοανοίγει)[21], 'he smiles, he moves them slightly and everything disappears' (letter 262).

Undoubtedly, as it was rightly suggested, the above-mentioned image may both express the Buddhist concept (of the world as an illusion) and

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18 Wrazas 2009: 171.

19 Bien 2007: 180–181. Interestingly, the narrator of the well-known *Life and Times of Alexis Zorbas*, who besides is writing a book about Buddha, suddenly realizes that 'Buddha is the last man!' (Ο Βούδας είναι ο στερνός άνθρωπος!).

20 Wrazas 2009: 172.

21 Kazantzakis commonly used compound words, especially substantivized epithets, in his *Odyssey*. His main aim was to imitate, on one hand, his ancient counterpart, and on the other, to pay homage to and to draw from the inexhaustible treasury of Modern Greek folk tradition. On the subject see especially Levitt 1978–1979; Colaclides 1983.

question it (by 'thickening the Nothingness and then making it visible').[22] Notably, when he was sketching *Akritas* (1940–1941), Kazantzakis was also working on one of his ambitious tragedies, *Buddha* (whose initial title was to be *Yangtze*), which he eventually completed after the German invasion of Crete.[23] Such motives as 'creation and obliteration' appear in a similar way in Kazantzakis' *Odyssey,* where the protagonist is sometimes the Homeric namesake, or at other times, Prince Motherth-Buddha.[24] Besides, the concept itself is evidently an elaboration of ideas abundantly expressed in the *Odyssey*. One might cite Book XVII as an example, where Odysseus tries to be a creator, bringing to life a variety of beings in his mind and then obliterating them, playing the role of a demiurge until he fully realizes – buddhistically – that the whole world is just a projection of his own mind.

There, the protagonist addresses his own Mind in a sort of litany as the 'Great Steward, secret Father of all Time'[25] (κρουφέ πατέρα του καιρού, μεγάλε Τελετάρχη, XVII 1175), or the 'Savior Mind' (ω Νου σωτήρα, XVII 1202). Furthermore, the Mind appears to be the element that has a creative power as well as the capability to restore things to their former state: 'you master sound, cut down the sun to size, / deceive the ears and eyes and bring the heart desire!' (πως μαστορεύεις τον αχό, πως λοτομάς τον ήλιο / και πως πλανάς τα μάτια και τ'αυτιά και το ποθούμε φέρνεις, XVII 1222–1223). Odysseus, after completing all his 'creation games', expresses his gratitude to the Mind, which he calls the 'last-born of demons' (δαιμόνιο στερνογέννητο, XVII 1263), for 'scattering my great pain in a sweet game!' (που διασκόρπισες τον πόνο στο παιχνίδι, XVII 1267). At the same time, the protagonist tends to realize that all the creations of his mind were just as if someone went into

22 Wrazas 2009: 173.

23 Bien 2007: 128–129.

24 Prevelakis 1961: 37. Prevelakis notes that the interest in Buddhism is visible not only in Kazantzakis' tragedy *Buddha,* but also to a great extent in the Prologue and Epilogue of his travelogue from Japan and China, where the same seems to happen as in the above-mentioned fragment of the sketch to *Akritas*. If we look closer at these passages we will find the same ideas that were expressed by the writer concerning the planned epic composition: "'Who is your god?' And I answered without hesitation: 'Buddha!' But my lips moved again: 'No! Epaphos [the god of touch]!' (Ταξιδεύοντας, Ιαπωνία-Κίνα: 8)

25 All translations from the *Odyssey* are by K. Friar.

'desire's nonexistent palace built on air' (αεροθεμελιωμένο ανύπαρχτο της πεθυμιάς παλάτι, XVII 1271), and what he actually possesses are 'the Keys of Nothingness' (τα κλειδιά του Τίποτα, XVII 1272).

As seen in the comparison outlined above, the concepts sketched in *Akritas* are just an elaboration of ideas present throughout Kazantzakis' earlier works. The main difference lies in the cultural provenance of both heroes: one Homeric and ancient, and the other, Byzantine and, by extension, Christian. Consequently, placing the sketched epic in a Byzantine context, which the *Odyssey* was largely deprived of, Kazantzakis undoubtedly planned to embrace the entire spectrum of Greek tradition and rise to a level of transcendence higher than the Buddhist Odysseus, who dematerializes himself, reaching the state of *nirvana* with his mind 'freed from its last cage, its freedom' (λευτερώθει απ' το στερνό κλουβί, τη λευτεριά του, XXIV 1393).

Perhaps, if the author had completed his endeavour, which even he himself referred to as his 'new mammoth' in one of his letters (August 1943), his epic indeed could have been the most mystical of all of his works and the protagonist might have achieved the highest level of initiation, a level that, as was already mentioned, was unattainable for the protagonist of his *Odyssey*.[26] Or on the contrary and in accordance with Bien's observation, the writer, fortunately for himself, did not 'pursue this chimera' and instead engaged in writing novels that made him the most recognizable modern Greek writer.[27]

Nevertheless, Byzantine influence on Kazantzakis, mainly regarding Christian mysticism, can be traced to many of his works, and especially to his philosophical credo, *Askitiki*.[28] Just like no one particular philosophical system dominated the writer's oeuvre – as he abundantly drew inspiration from a wide variety of sources, combining in a creative way not only Buddhism and Christianity, but also existentialism and communism, admiring both Odysseus, Christ, Buddha, Lenin and French existential philosophers[29] – nor does the Byzantine element predominate in his projected epic work. As we know from his *Askitiki*, in which he

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26 Wrazas 2009: 172.

27 Bien 2015: 227.

28 Roilos 2001: 229.

29 Poulakidas 1969: 128–132.

interweaves Bergsonian ideas with Byzantine spirituality, God appears to be another Akritas, a fighter at the outermost edges of the Universe (πολεμιστή στ' ακρότατα σύνορα), yet – as Roilos pays attention to – the Byzantine hero becomes rather a philosophical symbol than the national one[30].

As has already been underlined, Kazantzakis had rather nothing in common with patriotic Cretan or Greek attitude and he may be regarded mostly as a Byzantine Christian, in the sense that for him the most basic is the sacramental conviction that God is the Spirit in whom man finds the essence of life.[31] It is worth bearing in mind here that, as Beaton notes, it was during Kazantzakis' journeys to Mount Athos (1914) that a doctrine first crossed his mind to which he would adhere throughout his whole life, namely that the main goal of human existence is 'the transubstantiation of matter into spirit' and that only in this way can man attain harmony with the universe, a concept that was probably taken from Bergson's *élan vital*.[32] The same idea concerning spirit and its prevalence over the body we could find in many passages of Kazantzakis' *Odyssey*. The protagonist of the epic, who constantly seems to struggle between two opposite elements, the carnality and the spirituality, observes for example that 'both bread and wine are good, abundant meat is good, / when in your guts they turn not into dung, but spirit' (όντας δε γίνεται κοπριά παρά βαθιά ψυχή στο σπλάχνο, II 833–834).

The *Akritas* project that Kazantzakis in fact never began to implement, as we can guess from the scattered notes in his sketchbook and in his letters, was meant to exploit the figure of the Byzantine hero, deeply rooted in Modern Greek conscience, not in a national sense, but as a sort of bridge, a universal symbol of the fullest spiritual awareness, the elaboration of all the doctrines, philosophies, religions, literary works the writer was inspired by throughout his incredibly creative life.

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30 Roilos 2001: 229–230.

31 Poulakidas 1969: 134.

32 Friar 1969: xxiii; Beaton 2004: 119.

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